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Jill L. Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*

Jill L. Matus, [Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction](http://www.cambridge.org/gb/knowledge/isbn/item2713598/?site_locale=en_GB)
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[/?site_locale=en_GB](http://www.cambridge.org/gb/knowledge/isbn/item2713598/?site_locale=en_GB)) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 264 pp.
£59 hb. ISBN 9780521760249.

The title *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* does not quite do justice to the ambitious remit of this study, which engages, in innovative fashion, with two other hot topics in Victorian studies: trauma and the history of the emotions. This is an important book, not only for what it uncovers about Victorian literature's role in the construction of the cultural formation of trauma, but also as a demonstration of what interdisciplinary scholarship can achieve. Matus interweaves careful, often surprising close readings of fiction by Gaskell, Dickens, Eliot and Stevenson with cultural history, to produce a history of trauma and emotion in which Victorian literature emerges as the origin of modern ways of thinking about trauma and shock. Building on the work of nineteenth-century scholarship on the dynamic relationship between literature and science, Matus resists the naive view of Victorian literature's engagement with science and medicine that is content to point to echoes of scientific discourse in fiction. She is equally unsympathetic to the commonplace, presentist fallacy that imports modern medical criteria into Victorian texts to diagnose characters (or narrators, or authors) after the fact. Matus's study resists the assumption that psychological concepts first articulated in the modern period can be located in Victorian fiction; rather, she is interested in the differences between Victorian and modern structures of mind, and the productive questions that can be asked when those differences are acknowledged. The failure to discriminate between modern formulations of trauma and earlier structures of thought and emotion has painted a false picture of Victorian writing on responses to painful emotion, giving undue weight to modern ideas regarding memory disturbance and dissociation, and paying insufficient attention to the Victorian preoccupation with agency, responsibility and moral culpability. The tendency is to cast Victorian structures as either embryonic versions of Freudian concepts or outmoded models superseded by modern frameworks. Working from the premise that the Victorian idea of shock and modern theories of trauma might not be equivalent, Matus considers whether phenomena in Victorian literary and medical texts that appear similar to modern trauma are in fact fundamentally different, and what the implications of these differences might be for our understanding of the Victorian history of the emotions, and the development of the idea of trauma.

The book is divided into seven parts: a short introduction and historical survey chapter; essays on Gaskell's *North and South*, Dickens's 'The Signalman' and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* and *Daniel Deronda*, and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; and a short 'afterword on afterwards' that considers the differences between Victorian ideas of dissociation and modern thinking on trauma. The history of trauma will be valuable both to those who are familiar with the body of scholarship on trauma and those for whom Matus's book will be an introduction to the subject. Setting out the terms and problems of trauma studies with admirable clarity, casting its key questions in a new light, Matus's survey of the state of the field is both sophisticated and accessible. Her history accords with previous work on the emergence of trauma as a concept insofar as she describes its development alongside the establishment of the discipline of psychology; however, Matus argues forcefully, both in her historical chapter and throughout the book, that this development did not and could not have occurred in isolation. Her premise is that trauma is a cultural formation, and as such its origins and precursors can be found and studied in a variety of discourses, including popular fiction.

Matus's close readings offer fresh perspectives on familiar and less well-known texts. Her reading of *North and South* is particularly impressive, making a convincing case for repositioning this condition of England novel as a 'condition

of consciousness' novel. She argues that the critical focus on political economy and social relations in the novel has obscured its sustained interest in the relation between industrialisation, the effect of powerful feeling on psychic functioning, and the haunting aftermath of emotional experience. Her reading reclaims aspects of the novel that had been condemned retrospectively as excrecences, showing their integration with the novel's larger design, and holding *North and South* up as a key Victorian text on affect and consciousness. Through meticulous analysis of the language of dream and trance in the novel, read in tandem with mid-century texts on physiology, she shows how Gaskell's fusion of physiology and gothic anticipates aspects of later formulations. Such anticipation, however, should not be confused with accurate description of trauma *avant la lettre*. Matus is suspicious of trauma theory's universalising tendencies. In her study of Dickens's short story 'The Signalman', Matus acknowledges the ways in which this story, structured around repetition, compulsion and inaction, seems to have more in common with modern trauma than with contemporary scientific discourse on shock, but argues that its advanced articulation of later ideas is suggestive of how the ghost story may have influenced the way trauma theory developed. Similarly, in her analysis of psychic shock in *Daniel Deronda*, Matus places Gwendolen Harleth's distress within an emergent discourse of psychic wounding that would eventually produce trauma. In this discourse, the connections between memory disturbance and terror were made loosely, and psychic shock was more likely to be revelatory of moral transgression and the workings of conscience than of victimhood. This emphasis on conscience, agency, and ethics proves definitive of the Victorian concept of shock. In Matus's accomplished analysis of *Jekyll and Hyde*, which combines fine scrutiny of Stevenson's grammar with forensic unpicking of the complex relation between the novella and F.W.H. Myers's writing on 'multiplex personality', the discourse she unravels is interested not only in the fracturing of the unitary self, but the implications of that fracture for the idea of personal responsibility and self-governance. Insights such as these, which look forward to modern psychological formations while recognising distinctively Victorian concepts of selfhood, are the rewards of reading Victorian texts on their own terms. This study is a major achievement in both Victorian studies and cultural history, and will be of importance not only for literary scholarship, but also in opening up new areas for research in the history of the emotions.

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